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New European tricksters: Polish jokes in the context of European Union labour migration

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Abstract

In the context of contemporary European labour migration, where the most publicised pattern of labour migration sees Eastern European migrants move West, the dominant scholarly interpretation of Polish jokes is not applicable for the analysis of much of the joking by or about the Poles. Humour scholars frequently categorise jokes about ethnic groups into stupid or canny categories, and the Poles have been the butt of stupidity ('Polack') jokes in Europe and the United States. Today, in the European Union, Polish stupidity stereotyping in humour is less active and the Polish immigrant is hard working and a threat to indigenous labour, yet joking does not depict this threat in a canny Pole. The article applies the liminal concept of the trickster – an ambiguous border crosser or traveller – to elaborate some of the characteristics of jokes told by and about Polish migrants in the EU, mainly in the British context. A more robust explanatory framework is thus offered than is currently available in humour studies.

Keywords

British comedy, ethnic jokes, European Union joking, Polish jokes, the trickster

The trickster is an established concept in anthropology, where it has been used to label ambiguous figures in myth. Often, but not always, these figures have a humorous dimension. The ambiguity of the trickster can construct humour because all humour relies, in some form, on ambiguity or incongruity for its content. Much literature on the trickster describes types of humour in text (Bassil-Morozow, 2012, 2015; Hyde, 2008; Hynes and Doty, 1993; Mackin, 2002; Vizenor, 1988, 1990). These approaches have in common the use of the trickster to elaborate ambiguity in language. The trickster is thus discursive – Mackin describes how 'the trickster is not only a mythical reference point, but is also now a textual embodiment of humour' (2002: 194). In less convincing accounts, the trickster is connected to the collective unconscious or to mystical energies (Jung, 1972; Samuels, 1989; Tannen, 2007; Waddell, 2010).¹ We apply the concept of the trickster as an interpretive lens to view some jokes told by and about Polish people in the European Union (EU), in the context of recent labour migration.

The concept of 'liminality' frequently accompanies the trickster. Turner (1974, 1982, 1987), drawing on van Gennep's description of rites of passage, describes the middle, unstable phase of much ritual as the 'liminal' or as 'anti-structure'. This is a

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phase where 'subjects pass through a period of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo which has few ... of the attributes of either the preceding or subsequent profane ... cultural states' (Turner, 1974: 57). Turner uses the concept of the liminoid (1974: 58) to describe similar occurrences in modern society, which contrast with liminality in tribal societies because of increased choice and individuality. Turner argues that trickster figures appear in the liminal (Turner, 1987). For Turner, liminality in tribal society is functional. This is not the case in contemporary society (Turner, 1974: 83), where functions become multifunctions and the polysemic is emphasised in readings of tricksters and the liminoid. Trickster discourse is not just revolutionary – it appears in a liminal space where social structure is destabilised and linguistic categories are denied, yet the end result of trickster activity can be conservative and/or evolutionary. This is, therefore, not a carnivalesque humour. We argue that migrant worker and host society experience the liminoid and that trickster joking emerges in this space.

The theme of this special issue is social activism through the trickster. To elaborate the migrant as trickster and experiences of migration as liminoid, examples are used that include Polish political satire, British stand-up comedians telling jokes that feature the Polish, and Polish jokes about the English that appear on Polish internet forums. We elaborate how each example maps onto the concept of the trickster and might generate social activism or social activity. The concepts of the trickster and the liminoid provide more utility for describing much humour of migration than the 'stupid' or 'canny' ethnic joke scripts.

Social activism and the trickster

The definition of social activism used incorporates political or standpoint activism but is more specifically defined as humour that acts on, or creates, the social. The concern is with joking activity that focuses on the unfolding of new 'realities' from the liminoid, or the potential for such unfolding. Trickster humour could affect new social relations and appreciation of those relations, and provides a definition of social activism as the generation of interruptions to order. Disturbed order need not be exclusively political and could equally be cultural, social, local, national, ethnic or from any aspect of social structure. Discussions of the trickster from numerous sources describe characters and literary movements that can offer this interruption because trickster discourse creates disruption, chaos and the potential for new understandings and realities (Hyde, 2008; Mackin, 2002; Vizenor 1988, 1990).

Our approach is one informed by Hyde's argument that, although in myth the trickster often creates the world, trickster activity has a role to play in the unfolding of cultural potential (Hyde, 2008: 28). It is also an approach in common with Mackin's view that tricksters function 'as outlaws who manipulate meta-level fantasies and who are then in a position to realign the social world' (2002: 201). Tricksters do not provide an insignificant or furtive humour, it is active and mischievous and can affect ideology and hegemony.

The trickster is a stranger

This article does not provide a unified picture of the trickster – if that is possible at all. However, we do present the trickster as a concept in discourse that can accompany the liminoid. Vizenor (1988, 1990) elaborates the trickster, showing comic tropes and trickery that, although essentially resonating with and reshaping Native American mythic comic narrative, has the ability to travel to other contexts and disturb hegemony. The trickster mobilises the rhetorical ability of humour to resist cultural categories, reductionisms and forced representations (Vizenor, 1990). Through these

processes, Vizenor is addressing stereotypes of Native Americans (Lowe, 1996: 117). The trickster is a figure that Vizenor aligns with postmodern ideas on language and polysemy and one that he uses to resist the dominant telling of Native American history as a wholly tragic affair (Vizenor, 1990). More will be said on the importance of postmodernity later – on the status of the trickster as a disruptive agent towards certain modern tendencies.

The trickster has been described by Hyde as a drifter or traveller, as someone without a home or from a distant land:

all tricksters are ‘on the road’. They are the lords of in-between.... He is the spirit of the road at dusk, the one that runs from one town to another and belongs to neither. (2008: 6)

There is a connection between a lack of permanence and trickster liminality/behaviour. Perspectives not wedded to dominant discourse are more likely from the transient or visitor, as is the mischievous and ostensive observation of irrationality. These are trickster behaviours. Hyde’s trickster is a stranger and a stranger to modernity, which is an observation that maps onto Georg Simmel’s stranger. The trickster and stranger are connected; both affect knowledge or have their own ‘trickster knowledge’ – ways of doing, being and seeing that are not inherently known or understood by the insider or ‘serious’ actor – both also appear in liminoid spaces. Yet in distinction to the trickster, the stranger, for Simmel, ‘comes today and stays tomorrow’ (1971 [1908]: 143), is the ‘potential wanderer ... who ... has not got over the freedom of coming and going’ (1971 [1908]: 143), and thus Simmel signals the permanence of the stranger in modernity and thus the permanence of the liminoid.

The stranger today is no longer Simmel’s trader but a worker – a migrant worker. The contemporary stranger has been described by Bauman as a migrant worker, illegal immigrant, asylum seeker and refugee (Bauman, 1991, 2000, 2011). Bauman has a self-identity that sees him now a stranger in his own country and an authority on describing the plight of the stranger. All of Bauman’s strangers are moved or displaced by contemporary, globalising society. Vizenor might describe this as a tragic depiction of the other, yet it need not be. The stranger and the trickster are both ‘destructive’ figures because of their relationship to hegemonic knowledge and their creation of the new, and new ‘objectivity’ (Simmel, 1971 [1908]: 145). They are rarely simply victims. For Simmel and Bauman, the stranger is disruptive and ambiguous. Strangers promote ambivalence for the self because of the knowledge deficit created and the projective processes invoked to overcome this. This is a movement through the liminoid and aligns with the trickster. Hyde’s (2008) retelling of trickster tales emphasises displacement but also the intelligence *and* stupidity of the trickster. The trickster is said to present the mythic boundaries of knowledge and selfhood through these tales, which hold important lessons for the self. This sets up an intriguing and possibly apposite merging of concepts with which to unpack the joking of the migrant worker.

Tragedy, fixation and humour studies

A critique of both anthropology and social sciences is at work in Vizenor’s trickster discourse, first, for an imposition of tragedy, or tragic explanation and, second, for a fixing (and construction) of cultures.

On the imposition of tragedy, Vizenor explains that ‘Social science theories, without a doubt, are “bleak” reminders of the *hypotragic* intrusions and postcolonial

domination of tribal cultures and literature' (1990: 283, original emphasis). For Vizenor, social science discourse constructs the tragic because it does not allow for the depiction of cultures that are complex, playful, comic or that have a history of trickster discourse. The trickster was often suppressed under colonialism. The trickster was erased by Christian missionaries who mistook him for the devil (Hyde, 2008: 10).² For Vizenor, the social sciences do not redress the balance or allow for cultural expression. Thus, they remain colonial in form. He suggests that '[t]he instrumental language of the social sciences are tragic, or *hypotragic*, modes that withhold communal discourse' (1990: 282, original emphasis). Social science is a tragic activity and this tragedy is a Western imposition (Lowe, 1996: 105).

Connected to the idea of tragedy is the fixing of culture (Schmidt, 1995: 69). The forms and styles, concepts and ideologies of the academy are not always flexible, and the fixed reading of culture is a colonial activity. Vizenor explains:

The anthropologist would celebrate theories over imagination; in this sense, academic evidence was a euphemism for linguistic colonization of tribal memories and trickster narratives. (1988: xiv)

The impact of this on the literature of Native American cultures is, for Vizenor, a forcing 'into cultural categories' (1990: 278). For Vizenor, this is a poor representation of culture (1990: 278).

Vizenor's discussion of tragedy and fixation is a description of modern structuralism or structural anthropology. It is possible that humour scholars are guilty of similar offences, that the distilling of the 'ethnic joke' and the marking of stupid, canny, militaristic or cowardly joke targets, is a framework that does not record new, emerging joke forms, especially those that appear in liminoid spaces and display the ambiguity of the trickster. Humour scholars often require a degree of macro fixity to render joking patterns interpretable.

A methodological note

Vizenor argues 'the trickster is postmodern' (1990: 281). Trickster discourse is the antithesis of modern discourse. It appeals to a postmodern frame, to the identification of fragments of discourse rather than to quantitative enquiry. This marriage is successful because of the alignment of postmodernity and irony, yet trickster discourse is more than irony. Trickster tales employ any number of comic tropes and use non-comic forms of ambiguity. In this, we are reminded by Vizenor of a truism of postmodern discourse that '[t]here can never be "correct" or "objective" readings of the text ... only more energetic, interesting ... misreadings' (1990: 278).³ The investigation of the polysemy of culture and humour is a creative and not simply empirical endeavour. The quantification of jokes has been described as a difficult task (Schmidt, 1995: 71). With this in mind we make no attempt to quantify. It is not the aim to suggest that trickster humour is dominant in Polish joking but it may be especially relevant for the *Zeitgeist* of the new Europe as migrant workers find themselves in liminoid spaces.⁴

Polish joking and ethnic categorisation

Stereotypes of Eastern Europeans are usually unflattering. Burke explains how, in early modern times, 'Eastern Europeans were... described as barbarians by travellers from regions to the west of them and ... descendants of the Scythians or the Huns' (2004: 31). In modernity, this negativity continued towards the Poles, who were

stereotyped as dirty in Nazi Germany. Negative stereotypes formed ethnic jokes, with Polish settlers in the US the victims of 'Polack joke', which described the Polish as stupid (Davies, 1996: 11). In the case of the stupidity joke, Davies argues, the butt is a peripheral group, often migratory, who are out of step with modernity. The onset of modernity is said not to directly affect the group or leave them behind (1996: 19). Davies explains how the butt of the stupidity joke, of which the Poles are just one example globally, are the victims of macro-economic circumstance. Jokes of this ilk can align the stupid group with immoral behaviour and criminality.⁵ The stereotype is described by a traditional Prussian term '*Polnische Wirtschaft*'. It was coined in the era of the partitions of Poland in the 18th century and was meant to describe the lack of economic planning, mismanagement, chaos and dirt. Such discourse was used to justify the assertion that the Polish population should be managed by the Prussian state (and then the Reich). The discourse of *Polnische Wirtschaft* has been researched by German and Polish scholars (Orlowski, 1998).

Joking that mentions the Poles in the new Europe does not extensively use the stupidity pattern. The Polish situation is significantly different in the context of EU labour migration. Following the expansion of the EU in 2004, to include a number of Eastern European countries, Poles were not situated on the periphery of the process but were central to it and constitutive of social change. The workers migrating across Europe are not without technological skill and are not economically irrelevant. Many are skilled workers who find work. Thus, a definition of these migrants as peripheral would inadequately describe their presence.

There are some differences between the style of joking that has, historically, emanated *from* Poland and that examined here. Polish joking is frequently described as remaining internal and focused on political leaders or systems. Poprawa explains that Polish satire peaks in times 'when [the] Polish political elite was more active' (2012: 119). Polish satire was particularly effective 'in the 16th Century' and at 'the end of the 18th Century' (2012: 119), while political comedy was especially prevalent in the 17th century (2012: 119). During the Nazi occupation, satire was directed at the Germans, and under communism there existed an internal, anti-Soviet joking (Brzozowska, 2012; Davies, 2007, 2010; Poprawa, 2012). Both are attempts at resistance joking. Poprawa (2012: 125) explains that under the Nazis, Polish satire used three nationalities – Poles, Russians and Germans, with the Germans as butt. During the Cold War, a Pole, a Russki and American (2012: 125) were the three characters in anti-Soviet satire. Significantly, Polish/Russian/English joking is now present on Polish migrant internet forums. Contemporary examples inhabit a liminoid space where the jokes are not simply acts of resistance.

Polish tricksters in the EU

To elaborate on Polish migrant jokes as trickster discourse, examples are used that include Polish political satire, British stand-up comedians who tell jokes that feature Polish people, and Polish jokes about the English that appear on Polish internet forums. These examples are presented in turn and connected to the preceding discussion.

Szymon Live vs. The Party for Freedom

The first example demonstrates explicitly political trickster behaviour. *Szymon Live*, hosted by Szymon Majewski, is a popular Polish satirical television programme in the post-communist era. It was reported in March 2012 that *Szymon Live* caused the temporary crash of the website of the Dutch Party for Freedom (Partij voor de

Vrijheid or PVV) (DutchNews.Nl, 2013). Geert Wilders' PVV had encouraged supporters to leave complaints on the website about Central and Eastern European workers in the Netherlands. Although it had existed for some time, the website had been effectively condoned by the Dutch government, whose coalition relied on the PVV to maintain its majority (Overbeek, 2012). This attempt to document the perceived negative presence of migrant workers backfired. Majewski urged his viewers to bombard the site, which they did, causing the crash.

The incident provided a subversive and comic response to the PVV. The response is an example of trickster discourse in the vein that Vizenor (1990) describes. We have seen that the trickster mobilises humour to resist cultural reductionisms and forced representations (Vizenor, 1990). This is exactly what Majewski does. He defends Poles, and other European labour migrants, not through the usual responses to anti-immigrant racism, which include serious condemnation, protest or violence. Here, trickster tactics are employed. Wilders is mocked by Majewski but the mocking is chaotic and with material consequences for the PVV. Hyde (2008: 49) explains how the trickster is a traveller and an experimenter with the porous. Trickster discourse is adept at mastering the paradoxes of porosity (2008: 49), which are multiplied in postmodern, globalised times, especially in the liminoid context provided by migration. This example teaches a lesson on the (always already) porous boundaries of both cyber and geographical space. Wilders wishes boundaries were tightened up, movement curtailed and the ambivalence of the stranger removed from view. This is a denial of the fluidity of the postmodern world, a world that the trickster can move through, unimpeded by seriousness, to disrupt political activity.

Neither stupid nor canny: the Polish in contemporary comedy

The examples that follow are depictions of Poles in British stand-up comedy. The Polish are not depicted through a stupid or canny joke script. Al Murray, a comedian who performs *The Pub Landlord*, highlights the dominant representation in a description of 'crude national stereotypes' of the Europeans:

Polish people want to work, they want to work and they work hard, they do a good job and they make the rest of us look like a bunch of slack, feckless wankers with a thumb up our arse who have forgotten the meaning of graft. (Murray, 2012)

Comedians such as Dara O'Briain, Omid Djalili and Russell Peters have all used this stereotype as a way of discussing older stereotypes of their ethnicity. We present examples that show how the liminality of the traveller highlights some of the characteristics of the centre (in this case, mainstream British society) but does not simply provide a resistance joking.

Trickster migrants and comedy

The first example, from the stand-up comedian Jimmy Carr, shows how the stupid script is not applicable for explaining the Poles presence in contemporary comedy:

Britain is proud to boast that we are home to the most hard working, diligent, adaptable workforce in Europe – the Poles. They're bloody good aren't they? Yeah, round of applause for the Poles. Of course you get a lot of right-wing people saying oh these Poles; they come over here taking our jobs. I think if a guy from Poland arrives and he doesn't speak the language, he doesn't have any money and he doesn't

know anyone, and he takes your job on the first day – you’re shit, fuck off. (Carr, 2008)

The right wing, who propagate anti-immigrant racism, again appear as the butt. The joke should be categorised as an ‘ethnic joke’, although the Poles are not the butt and are depicted through the new stereotype. In this and other jokes, a stereotype of the Polish worker is created – Poles are a certain type of worker doing a certain type of labour and, to the bourgeois comedian, this is good. It is the lower-class indigenous worker who is the butt, and also the political right. Although the indigenous worker is degraded and ridiculed in this case, we should examine what happens to the indigenous worker in this joke. A stranger has taken their job in one day with no knowledge of language or funds – the worker has been tricked. The trickery is enacted by the stranger, or the trickster disguised as the migrant worker. The image, then, is of a migrant with new knowledge that is not possessed by the local.

In this example, the Pole possesses almost exceptional ability and is a trickster who is able to easily overcome their new situation. Mackin suggests “[t]rickster” is a complex term indicating an ability to subvert surreptitiously’ (2002: 190). The job is taken in no time at all but this is not a literal description of changing employment demographics in the West, it is a joke. The image of the trickster appears with the image of the stranger, and so the joke works to highlight the absurdity of such anti-immigrant racism while also presenting bourgeois impressions on the work ethic of the British working class. This is not a trickster that resists dominant capitalist modes of organisation but it is one that resists racism. It is thus conservative and radical at the same time.

A second example is elaborated in the comedy sketch show, *The Armstrong and Miller Show*, which first aired by the BBC in 2007. In one sketch, two Polish plumbers⁶ are working on a shower. They are, in fact, middle-class (possibility retrained) British plumbers posing as Polish plumbers in order to gain work. The plumbers speak in broken English – ‘his England [English] is not so happy’ (Armstrong and Miller, 2007) and express the stereotype of the effective, efficient Polish worker – ‘we are Poles, we work until we die’. They are also grateful for work – one of the counterfeit plumbers explains to the woman they are working for that he will name his child after her – ‘Me-Is Lew-Is’ [Mrs Lewis] (Armstrong and Miller, 2007). Once she leaves the room, the plumbers revert to English received pronunciation. One says, ‘Bloody hell, I can’t keep this up much longer.’ The other replies ‘How else are we going to get work?’ Overall, it is the stereotype that the Poles have a better reputation as workers, not the job-stealing, antiimmigrant rhetoric, which is expressed in this sketch. The English plumber needs to employ trickster tactics if he is to find work and thus ‘overcome’ the impact of the stranger – this is knowledge gained from the stranger – and trickster tactics can be learnt. Hyde (2008) explains how the trickster is often described in myth through cycles of learning. The stereotype of the work ethic of migrant workers and the effect this has on the image of the indigenous worker (perhaps the biggest trick in itself), can become the subject of reclamation and disguise.

Contemporary Polish jokes about the English

The final examples deal with the reversal of the usual target of the ethnic joke, as the centre takes on the role of periphery and becomes the butt of the joke. This is a reversal through trickster activity – the holding of a mirror to the powerful. Polish jokes targeted the Germans during Nazi occupation and the Russians in the Cold War.

In the period of the New Europe, the English have become targets. It is usually the centre that jokes about the periphery and the dominant UK culture industries have perpetuated this pattern. Trickster discourse is assertive towards the centre, not simply for self-preservation, but because there is a message to pass on.

There are jokes that are communicated between Poles that feature the English as butt that depict them as aristocratic, idiosyncratic, misogynistic, in some cases witty, in other cases unfortunate or perhaps even stupid (thus the stupidity script is not wedded to peripheral representation). The examples collected appear on internet websites and have been translated from Polish into English by one of the authors.

Personal safety and the English

The first examples of jokes found on Polish websites depict the English as having disregard for their own personal safety and an amount of arrogance that borders on stupidity:

At a restaurant in Paris one of the guests is drinking a glass of whisky every few minutes.

Do you know, asks a man sitting next to him, that 10,000 Frenchmen die every year due to excessive alcohol drinking?

Frankly, I don't care. I'm an Englishman!

(Anon., n.d.)

A fire has been discovered on a ship. All passengers are leaving in panic, only one Englishman is perfectly calm, sitting on a chair and smoking a pipe.

Sir, this ship is going to sink in a few moments! – a sailor shouts at him.

So what? It's not my ship.

(Anon., n.d.)

The first example could, very easily, be a joke told by the French, Americans or Australians about the English. In this context it is being read or told in a Polish forum. The jokes present a warning on colonial and national arrogance. The first could be a warning on the dangers of foreign spirits, on the effects of particular spirits, or it could just be a joke about how individuals may feel their nation is superior. The second can be seen as the ridicule of a national arrogance that develops from excessive property ownership and is thus a critique of capitalism. Both, in their way, focus on excess. Both are most accurately described as a warning not to trust the judgement of those from the centre because it is flawed. This is a trickster warning to the traveller. Ostensive observation of the irrationalities of existence is a consistent theme in trickster discourse. The trickster, in a liminoid space, will offer guidance and correctives for those experiencing the centre.

English bourgeois misogyny

The next two examples are similar because they deal with bourgeois eccentricity. Both show elements of misogyny and, specifically, disregard for wives.

Two middle-aged Englishmen were playing golf. At some point a funeral procession was passing next to the golf course. One of the players put the stick away and took his cap off.

What's happened? Why have you stopped playing? – His companion asked.

Please excuse me, but, after all, we were married for 25 years ...

(Anon., n.d.)

A sophisticated English gentleman is approached by his acquaintance.
Sir, I have just learnt that your wife had escaped with your footman.
Ah, nothing to worry about, I was going to lay him off a long time ago.
(Anon., n.d.)

Not mentioned in the previous section, but quite relevant, is that the jokes deal with the eccentricities and irrationalities that are inevitable in a society stratified by social class. These two jokes highlight this more clearly – through the signifiers of golf and sophistication – and it is the immigrant joker who is placed at a lower position in the socio-economic structure. Under communism, Polish jokes about party members attacked the centre. Here, the centre is derided and the traveller is warned that those in unchecked positions of power can be ‘strange’, irrational and even lose some of their humanity. The message is related through the Englishman’s bourgeois eccentricity. These are, again, liminoid attacks on the centre from the stranger who is yet to be merged with the host society.

The trickster is tricked

Hyde (2008) outlines how the trickster is not always successful and in some cases is depicted as foolish. The traveller is shown to be out of place in this next joke. Although the previous jokes depict subtle warnings about the centre, this joke warns the stranger of the dangers of becoming disconnected from their surroundings or in believing a little too firmly in the stereotypes of the natives. Here, the Polish travellers are tricked by their own misperception:

A Polish couple are travelling on a train in England. An Englishman is sitting in front of them, reading a paper. The husband starts feeling peckish and grabs a sandwich. The wife stops him:
This is impolite. You should ask this gentleman if he would fancy a sandwich.
The husband taps the Englishman on a knee.
A sandwich?
No, thanks, replies the Englishman.
The husband has eaten the sandwich and wants to drink some tea. The wife reminds him again:
Listen, it’s five o’clock. They always drink tea around this time. Maybe we should give him some?
A cup of tea?
No, thanks, replies the Englishman.
The wife turns to the husband again.
Do you know what? We haven’t introduced ourselves. This is rather impolite!
The husband sighs and again approaches the Englishman. He starts with introducing his wife:
My wife ...
No, thanks, the Englishman interrupts him.
(Anon., 2012)

This joke could be described as following a stupidity script. The joke shows an amount of stupidity or naivety on the part of the traveller. What separates it from a ‘Polack’ joke is that it is situated with jokes about the English not the Polish, and is as

much about the English as the Poles, while being told from the Polish point of view. It is indeed a conceptual confusion that humour studies usually sees the butt rather than the butt *and* the teller as responsible for the ‘ethnicity’ of the joke. The joke is a warning to the migrant in trickster discourse. It is a subtle reminder that stereotypes (in this case of English manners) are exaggerations. In this joke, the centre tricks the periphery in the liminoid space of constructed manners. It is a joke that has special relevance to the Polish in the context of EU labour migration to the UK.

*A Pole, a Ruski and an Englishman*⁷

The final example builds on the style of joking that uses three nationalities or groups, with one of the groups forming the butt of the joke. As outlined, this has several Polish incarnations, with the Polish/Russian/German joking under Nazi occupation and Polish/American/Russian joking during the Cold War. In these forms, the Germans and the Russians represented the centre or power holder. In the context of EU labour migration, Poles in the UK reformulate this trope with jokes at the expense of the English:

A Pole, a Russian and an Englishman found a magic lake. If they say a wish before jumping into the lake, it will become what they wish for.
The Russian is running and shouting ‘Vodka!!!’ And the lake turns into vodka.
The Pole is running and shouting ‘Beer!!!’ And the lake turns into beer.
The Englishman is running but slipped just before jumping into the lake. ‘Oh, shit’, he is shouting.
(Anon., 2012)

Tricksters often direct humour and ridicule at the centre. In this case, the English, as employers and hosts, are obvious power holders. This humour acts as a leveller through gentle ridicule of the English. The joke tradition shows that, in the past, there was no need to allow deference or fear of the centre to prevent the generation of humour. In the context of Western European anti-immigrant racism, there is usefulness in categorising the English, as the Germans and Russians were in the past, as oppressors and occupiers of positions of power. Trickster discourse frequently attacks the centre from the periphery but it also buttresses power relations. The polysemy of the joke allows for these to be seen as an attempt to ‘unseat’ the centre.

Conclusion

Many have discussed the enjoyment that humour brings as a motivating factor for its generation. Few writers have theorised humour, enjoyment and identity formation as inherently connected. Mackin, employing Žižek’s ideas on the psycho-social dimensions of enjoyment, argues that ‘[b]y imagining alterity, the community fantasizes its agency’ (Mackin, 2002: 198). This can be applied to an understanding of the rhetoric of the Polish joking discussed, which is one that situates the migrant community and the host in a liminoid space. It may well reverse older joking patterns but, more significantly, it is one that has trickster logic, is mischievous and, maybe, seeks to undo the strangeness or the newness of context, and thus be socially active or creative of new realities.

The humour of the Polish migrant is a trickster discourse and thus assertive, outward looking and sometimes directed towards the impositions of the centre. Krupat explains how ‘[t]he trickster’s nature is to interrupt, to overturn a traditional way of reading’ (Krupat, 1992: 183 in Schmidt, 1995: 66). It is possible to take a more diffuse or ‘interrupted’ reading of ‘ethnic’ humour in a postmodern world. The

taxonomies of humour studies are Vizenoresque tragic simplifications of a wider complexity of jokes and tricksters. Vizenor employs Jean-François Lyotard to make the point that 'the people does not exist as a subject but as a mass of millions of insignificant and serious little stories that sometimes let themselves be collected together to constitute big stories' (Lyotard, 1987: 85 in Vizenor, 1990: 277). The Polish joking of humour studies is one such amalgamation of small stories into a big story, but also one that is dominated by the American case. An alternative account can describe the emergence of the trickster.

The study of ethnic jokes has not drawn on postmodern writing a great deal. In fact, it is not difficult to argue that the categorisation of ethnic jokes is structuralist in style, identifying clearly demarcated types and tending not to be concerned with novel, theoretically interpreted or empirically observed changes. Humour studies contains a dominant telling of 'Polish jokes'. They have a history and those documented conform to this history. Of course such jokes exist, but one could be excused for thinking that ethnic joking is not subject to change, that jokes that emerge inside groups are not contingent on the liminoid space in which social change places individual and group identity. It seems unnecessary that the ethnic joke should remain so rigid, and future studies could employ the concept of the trickster to elaborate joking at and by other strangers or wanderers.

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¹ Jungian and post-Jungian writing has somewhat monopolised the concept of the trickster in cultural studies. Such approaches usually suffer from reification, deification, reductionism and a lack of evidence. Tannen exemplifies this:

This book elaborates my discovery of a major shift in western consciousness regarding the emergence of an intentional and acknowledged feminine energy which has been inchoate within the collective unconscious for a millennium. I discovered this energy, which I call the female trickster, during my dissertation investigation as an archetypal energy which could be manifested only by women writing about women for women. (2007: xi)

In another example, Samuels (1989: 124–5) suggests there is a connection between trickster nature and borderline personality disorder because of shared liminality, and suggests that trickster behaviour might be a way out of neurosis. The argument is without solid elaboration, theoretical substantiation and is poorly evidenced, relying on two rather brief case studies.

² Such processes of ambivalence removal match the removal of the other that is central to the modern project described by Bauman (1991).

³ This can be contrasted with post-Jungian postmodern discussions of the trickster which instead of identifying the fragmentation of discourse and the power relations involved in fixity, identify the fragmentation of discourse and then seek to fix it through reference to archetypes and unconscious energies (Samuels, 1989; Tannen, 2007; Waddell, 2010).

⁴ We collected jokes about the English from Polish internet sources, using two search terms: ‘kawaly o Anglikach’ and ‘dowcipy o Anglikach’. We included jokes from the following websites:

<http://humoris.pl/> – a website storing almost 32,000 jokes

<http://www.superpolonia.info/> – an internet portal offering advice and entertainment for Poles living abroad

<http://www.dowcipy24.pl/> – a website with jokes organised around several categories

<http://www.tja.pl/> – an entertainment portal for teenagers describing film releases, online games and jokes

<http://madeinengland.blox.pl/html> – a blog written by a Polish migrant in the UK.

We have included jokes that were repeated on the websites and therefore could be the most popular among Polish migrants in the UK. When translating the jokes from Polish, we avoided word-for word translation; instead, we paid attention to rendering the meaning of the jokes in English. As a rule, we excluded jokes that were poorly constructed and with obscure meanings. We did not discuss jokes that rely on word play that could not be understood without extensive knowledge of the local cultural background.

⁵ A recent form of this stigmatisation exists as Polish migrants were depicted as car thieves in Western Germany in the 1980s. The cars were said to be smuggled back to Poland or Russia. Despite the perceived growth of affluence in Poland, this stereotype is still used in Germany. Paradoxically, it is more prevalent in western areas, where fewer cars were stolen.

⁶ The stereotype is associated with the fear surrounding the possible impact of East European cheap migrant labour on old EU economies. This negative rhetoric was reversed in another example through a publicity campaign directed primarily at French tourists visiting Poland. Launched by the Polish Tourism Board, its pivotal element was an advert using a seductive image of a young Polish plumber with a catchphrase: ‘I’m staying in Poland, do come over.’ The humour underpinning the campaign received extensive coverage in the global media (BBC, 2005).

⁷ A ‘Ruski’ is a disdainful term in Poland to denote a Russian, echoing the term ‘Polack’ in American English (i.e. uncivilised, brutal, barbaric, a Hun). There are some linguistic intricacies involved here. ‘*Russki*’ in Russian simply means a Russian person or the Russian language. Similarly, the word ‘Polack’ in Polish (spelt ‘*Polak*’) means a Pole. Neither of these is derogatory.